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SUBJECT: TRANSNISTRIA OPTS TO DEAL WITH MOLDOVA -- FOR NOW

Classified By: Ambassador Michael D. Kirby for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: In a reversal of earlier policy, Transnistria's Foreign Minister Valery Litskai said at an informal 5 plus 2 gathering that he was open for dialogue with Chisinau and praised President Voronin's initiatives on Transnistria. Litskai said Transnistria was prepared to resolve the thorny issues dividing the two sides, including demilitarization of the region, and called on Chisinau to work out specific projects. Litskai said Transnistria only wanted veto powers over unilateral changes to Transnistria's future status. The Russian envoy tried to lower expectations of a breakthrough and argued the 5 plus 2 format was irrelevant for the time being. The next informal meeting between Moldovan and Transnistrian negotiators is scheduled to take place by November 10, and the likely date for 5 plus 2 talks would be November 19, if Litskai-Sova talks are successful.

Litskai: Transnistria ready for serious talks

¶2. (C) At an informal three-hour 5 plus 2 dinner in Odessa October 23 on the margins of an OSCE Confidence-Building seminar, Transnistria's "Foreign Minister" Valery Litskai was uncharacteristically polite and open to a serious dialogue. Litskai welcomed President Voronin's initiatives and characterized his earlier public rebuttals as politically-motivated PR. He emphasized the timing was propitious for unprecedented thawing because the situation on the ground had improved and Transnistria no longer faced an economic blockade and a possible melt-down of its financial system.

¶3. (C) In a private conversation, Litskai asked whether the US continued to support a federal solution of the conflict. Litskai explained economic and security guarantees, including Russian military presence, were less important than a veto power over unilateral changes of Transnistria's status in a reunified Moldova. He emphasized Tiraspol did not want to stymie Chisinau's economic or foreign policy but needed an institutional arrangement that would prevent Chisinau from "swallowing" the region.

Sova: Moldova will work with Tiraspol

¶4. (C) Moldova's Minister for Reintegration Vasile Sova (who by mutual agreement sat next to Litskai at the table) praised Transnistria's open-mindedness and said the GoM would establish seven task forces to promote President Voronin's initiatives. He pledged that specific project proposals would be worked out for Transnistria. Litskai promised prompt feedback and called for more active involvement of Transnistrian and Moldovan parliaments in order to build a

lasting foundation for the eventual political solution of the conflict. (Note: Last week Moldovan Parliamentary Speaker Lupu proposed inter-parliamentary contacts. End Note.) Sova and Litskai are scheduled to meet again by November 10 to discuss specific projects drafted by the GoM's working groups.

Litskai: demilitarization not an issue

¶15. (C) Litskai pointed out that the Moldova region could be demilitarized rapidly provided civilian retraining programs

for Transnistrian servicemen and external guarantees were in place. Litskai argued the command staff could speedily work out a schedule for destroying military hardware and emphasized neither Moldova nor Transnistria needed their armies because they faced no military threats. He added that Transnistria's military capacity is shrinking each year as older officers retire without trained younger ones to take their places. Finally, he noted that the Transnistrian youth are uninterested in serving in the military and are constantly seeking shorter terms when compelled to serve.

¶16. (C) Litskai was quite open when he said there was no need for either the Moldovan or the Transnistrian forces to have sophisticated weapons. Rifles, he said, were enough. He noted that one of the factors working in favor of potential future demilitarization was that no one had been providing either side with weapons. In the long-run, Litskai suggested that Transnistria could get on just fine with a 1,000-person strong gendarmerie and the Moldovan side could have a similar force of some 2,000 to 4,000.

Transnistria wants assistance

¶17. (C) Litksai said Western countries made a big mistake by shunning Transnistria before and lavished praised on the Ambassador's suggestion to include Transnistria in the MCC program. He said his office could issue a call for aid to Transnistria's farmers if the US was willing to provide it.

Nesterushkin: 5 plus 2 framework irrelevant

¶18. (C) Russian Envoy for Transnistrian talks Valery Nesterushkin said at a breakfast the next day that he was taken aback by Litskai's "overtures." Nesterushkin tried to lower expectation of a breakthrough, saying similar thawing led nowhere on previous occasions. Nesterushkin added that the 5 plus 2 negotiating framework was hanging in the balance and was irrelevant for the "bilateral" talks between Moldova and Transnistria, which seemed to be gaining momentum. He said that the 5 plus 2 should not meet any time soon because it had nothing to discuss at this stage. Despite Nesterushkin's hope to disband Q)- or freeze -- the 5 plus 2, the Spanish Chair said it would send an invitation to the parties to participate in a 5 plus 2 meeting, which might again be "informal." In response to DAS Kramer's suggestion that the invitation await the results of the next Sova-Litskai meeting, the Spanish said a letter might be forthcoming which would ask for a 5 plus 2 if the Sova-Litskai confab went well. At the end of the informal talks at breakfast, the Spanish said they would likely ask to hold talks on November 19 in Madrid if the Sova-Litskai discussions went well.

Comment

¶19. (C) Transnistria's political leadership is seeking not to lose its grip on power now that it is faced with pressure from business elites which benefit from EU's trade preferences that only Moldova can provide. Voronin's enticing offers go far to facilitate Transnistria's exports and accommodate its grievances. With the prospect of economic collapse caused by the Russian suspension of aid and exacerbated by a serious drought, Transnistrian business interests are loath to reject Voronin's proposals out of

hand. Litskai's overtures may be designed to test the ground for a d0tente and possibly a more serious dialogue between Chisinau and Tiraspol. Smirnov now faces more restricted room for maneuver and may now have to accommodate his domestic constituency and consider Moldova's offers.

¶10. (C) That Nesterushkin looked genuinely surprised by the extent of Litskai's willingness to find common ground on key issues suggests that Russia may be an important target of Litskai's message. Transnistria's new-found openness to Moldova could be meant as a powerful signal to Russia to resume aid and stop harassing the regime. Next week, Litskai will be in Moscow for talks with the MFA, which may be decisive in determining the direction of next steps, and a meeting of "foreign ministers" from Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The Ambassador plans to meet with Litskai in Tiraspol after his return from Moscow.

¶11. (C) We are witnessing events unfolding rapidly with new momentum. However, optimism should be tempered by the fact that Litskai is known to change his positions rapidly, and dangle concessions in front of everyone to buy time. The Transnistrians may feign willingness to compromise but just drag their feet until after presidential elections in Russia, rather than rely on promises from a lame-duck regime. Even if Litskai and the Transnistrians are serious about cooperating with Chisinau, one should not underestimate the Moldovan Government's ability to mess things up.

KIRBY